U.S. said to block Panama's access to Noriega files

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PANAMA CITY, Panama — The United States has placed a shroud of secrecy around scores of Noriega intelligence records that are believed to show widespread corruption, drug trafficking and former CIA links.

Eusebio Marchosky, the comptroller general administrative judge investigating corruption from the Noriega years, said a denial of access to Panamanian authorities amounted to "obstruction of justice" on the part of U.S. authorities. "They are protecting thieves," he charged.

The records are from the intelligence branch of the now-disbanded Panamanian Defense Forces and from the old National Department of Investigations, the Panamanian equivalent of the FBI.

The extremely tight security surrounding the records has led to speculation that they contain evidence of CIA payments to former Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega before he fell from grace with the U.S. government and eventually was overthrown by a U.S. invasion last Dec. 20.

The general reportedly was being paid $200,000 a year by the CIA in the 1970s and early 1980s before his alleged involvement with drug trafficking brought the payments to a halt.

The United States agreed this week to pay General Noriega's legal fees, thus avoiding having to unfreeze his funds and thereby disclose how much Washington had paid him. He is awaiting trial in Miami on drug charges.

The records have also fueled

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speculation that they might disclose General Noriega's relationship with President Bush, who was CIA director in 1976 and 1977, and with Pentagon leaders. Mr. Bush has denied a close relationship with the general.

According to one source, the records fill 15,000 boxes at two U.S. military posts on Flamingo Island and Corozal in the old Canal Zone. Another source said he saw only eight boxes at Corozal.

The U.S. Embassy, in a statement last Friday, said that "negotiations are continuing" between U.S. officials and an undisclosed Panamanian government agency.

"There are well-established international legal procedures as well as provisions in the Panama Canal Treaties for transmitting court or judicial orders for service on nationals of other countries," the statement said, making no reference to the fact that the United States captured the records in the invasion.

Mr. Marchosky speculated that limited access was being granted to Ricardo Arias Calderon, first vice president and head of the Ministry of Justice and Government. But a ministry statement last week said no Panamanian has had access to the records.

Mr. Calderon's chief legal aide, Ebraim Asvat, said in a recent interview that the records would likely remain forever in the hands of the United States. "It is a fait accompli in view of the invasion," he said.

Mr. Marchosky said the U.S. refusal to grant him full access to the records was crippling his search for assets misappropriated or stolen by members of the Noriega government. He said his access was being limited to cases he had developed from other evidence.

He said he especially would like to uncover wrongdoing involving members of the newly formed Public Force, which is officered by members of the old Defense Forces.

"The people who are supposedly under investigation are the ones who have access to the records," he said, referring to the fact that the Public Force comes under Mr. Calderon's ministry. "I support the invasion, but if the Americans obstruct justice, it makes them occupiers."

The first head of the Public Force, Col. Roberto Armijo, was forced to resign Jan. 3 after National Bank of Panama records showed he had gotten at least $1 million in unauthorized funds. Last week, President Guillermo Endara fired Lt. Col. Aristides Valdonedo, subdirector of the National Police and a drug specialist, who is under investigation for misdeeds committed during the Noriega years.

Another police official, Capt. Leslie Loaiza, has come under suspicion in the death of the 3-year-old grandson of Col. Marcos Justines, the imprisoned Noriega chief of staff who reportedly stole $40 million from the National Bank of Panama during the invasion.

The child was allegedly killed to try to force Colonel Justines' relatives to disclose the whereabouts of the money.

Sun stringer David Adams contributed to this article.